

Empathy

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WE ALL remember S. Whenever some graduates of our little high school get together, the conversation always turns to him. We all remember S. as intelligent, a good speaker, an original thinker. If he was also a little stand-offish and as likely to make enemies as friends, well, we don't seem to remember that so well any more. After all, we were brought up not to speak poorly of the deceased.

Anyway, after S. graduated from our high school, he went on to the university, unlike most of us. I went there for a year or so myself, but soon found out I wasn't cut out for it. S. seemed to be more at home at the U, however. From my few conversations with him (we were never really good friends) it seemed at first as if he had found his niche. He got good grades, moved into a new circle of friends, let his hair grow some. The All-American college kid.

Well, as I was saying, I soon found out that I wasn't made for college life, so I dropped out and went back home to work. I got engaged shortly after I quit school, and got a job in my fiancée's father's store. The job wasn't all that bad; my father-in-law has me managing the place now, so I get paid okay, and I get to let my hair grow.

A year or so passed, and my wedding date was coming up, and I was busy at the store, and, you know how things are, I didn't keep up with the news too well, but not many people do in our town. There was talk of a new war, and the army was drafting more people, hell, I knew two guys who enlisted. I wasn't too worried about it myself, because they were drafting the young guys, just out of high school, and since this promised to be a small war, I didn't figure the draft would get to me.

Anyway, one night I was sitting in the local tavern, a combination bar and pool hall, watching some friends shoot a game of eight-ball, when I saw a familiar figure walk in, order a beer, and sit down by himself in a booth. I got up, bought myself another beer, and inspected the newcomer. Sure enough, it was S., but he looked different somehow. Of course, I hadn't seen him in eighteen months. I picked up my beer and carried it over to where he sat.

Well, I greeted him, I knew that was S. the moment he walked in. I'd know his walk anywhere.

S. looked up from his drink slowly, with a sort of halfsmile on his lips. 'Howdy,' he said. 'Have a seat.'

I inspected S. as I sat down. He had gotten his hair cut and shaved off all his beard, save his mustache, but the change was more than the way he looked. There was a kind of haggard and hollow look around his eyes that seemed to show a lot of suffering or something.

Anyway, I started talking to him, asking him how college was, how was the family, how was his sex life, that sort of thing. He answered my questions distantly and in just a few words, so I could tell my questions didn't interest him. So I started telling him about the news around town, about who had gotten married and who had gone into the army and about my upcoming marriage. I told S. he was welcome to come to the wedding if he wanted, but he wouldn't commit himself, and showed only polite interest in the things I told him.

I asked S. if he would like to shoot some pool, and he agreed with little enthusiasm. We picked out cues and played a game while I tried to make small talk. S. seemed to be doing his best not to look bored, asking questions about my fiancée and my family. But I could tell that he was becoming restless, even agitated.

I was rambling on, like I said, talking about most anything, when I happened to glance at my watch. It was a quarter after ten.

Well, it's about time to go home and watch Johnny Carson, I said.

After I said that, I looked at S., and, let me tell you, I was shocked. His face had taken on the most hateful expression, and—

Well, the next thing I knew, I was lying on my back, staring up at the ceiling, and S. was walking out the door.

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We haven't seen S. since that day. We hear about him every now and then—even see him on the TV news occasionally, at one of his rallies, or something—but neither his family, nor his old friends, not anybody else ever gets any word from him.

Things haven't changed much around here, though. I got married and my wife is expecting now. We're hoping for a boy, but I can tell you one thing—no kid of mine is ever going to that university. Seems you just can't protect a kid from religion these days.